

With US states facing a \$230 billion loss in education funding, Betsy DeVos channels public assets to private schools

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Despite the criminal efforts of the Trump administration and every state government to “reopen the economy” under unsafe conditions, the economic crisis caused by the pandemic continues to deepen. As the US slides into conditions worse than the Great Depression, with every state facing an unprecedented budget crisis, the American ruling class is working to impose the full burden of the pandemic on the working class through massive austerity, including an evisceration of K-12 public education.

Since the start of the pandemic, nearly 40 million people have filed for unemployment, adding to the 7.1 million who were already unemployed before the pandemic, while an untold number of undocumented immigrants have also lost their jobs. These devastating job losses, of which roughly 42 percent are estimated to become permanent, will cause immense declines in state income tax and sales tax revenues, producing budget crises in every state.

Last week, the Center on Budget Policy and Priorities (CBPP) forecast state budget shortfalls of \$185 billion for the current fiscal year ending June 30, \$370 billion for the 2020-21 fiscal year, and \$210 billion for the 2021-22 fiscal year, for a cumulative total of \$765 billion. Significantly, these figures are 53 percent higher than projections the CBPP made in mid-April, indicating that the vast scale of the crisis is slowly coming into focus, and the real deficits will likely be far greater.

Using the CBPP data on declining state revenues, combined with estimates on the amounts that school districts will have to spend to cope with the pandemic—including additional costs to provide food to children, provide internet connectivity and devices, and to offset the educational regression that students have undergone—the Learning Policy Institute (LPI) recently estimated that states will require an additional \$230 billion to fund education through the coming fiscal year.

In a separate analysis by LPI, the advocacy group projects that with a 15 percent loss in funding, roughly 319,000 teacher jobs would be destroyed. If state revenues decline by 30 percent, roughly 700,000 teaching positions would likely be cut.

Beyond public education, state governments provide funding for vital social services, including health care, housing, infrastructure, and social welfare programs. With the June 30 deadline for states to balance their budgets rapidly approaching, each of these programs are being cut in states across the country, with deeper

cuts to take place throughout June.

The most drastic reductions announced so far have been in **California**, where Democratic Governor Gavin Newsom declared a \$54.3 billion deficit through fiscal year 2021, nearly 37 percent of the state’s total general fund budget. Newsom recently announced a plan to cut 10 percent from the state’s K-12 education fund, amounting to \$6.5 billion for the coming year. This will lead to roughly \$500 million in cuts from Los Angeles schools alone, a year after over 30,000 teachers in the city went on strike to demand improved pay and school funding.

New York City already implemented \$185 million in K-12 education cuts for the current fiscal year, primarily from the central office, and faces an additional \$642 million shortfall for the coming year. In **Broward County, Florida**, where teachers joined a statewide strike earlier this year, officials have implemented a hiring freeze in anticipation of \$35-150 million in cuts next year.

Earlier in May, **Ohio**’s Republican Governor Mike DeWine announced \$775 million in cuts from the state budget for the current fiscal year, including \$355 million from K-12 schools. At the start of the month, **Georgia** officials began planning cuts of 14 percent from their budget, including \$1.4 billion from K-12 public education spending.

In total, 22 states have forecast budget cuts for the current fiscal year, ranging from three percent in **Louisiana** to as much as 18 percent in **Utah**. For the coming fiscal year, 30 states have announced estimated budget shortfalls, which will necessitate cuts as high as 24 percent in **Colorado**, 25 percent in **Hawaii**, and 30 percent in **New Mexico**. Huge portions of these cuts will fall on public education, which is the largest budget item in most states.

The response of the Trump administration and both parties in Congress has been to let the states starve. As part of the CARES Act, which passed with virtually unanimous bipartisan support, trillions of dollars were funneled to Wall Street and the large corporations, while merely \$13.5 billion was provided for K-12 education.

Over the past week, Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos has been increasingly strident in demanding that states allocate significant portions of their minimal CARES Act funding to private and parochial schools. The billionaire heiress was brought into the Trump administration because she has long been a virulent opponent of public education, and she is now utilizing the

pandemic crisis to further this reactionary agenda.

On April 30, the Department of Education issued guidance on how states should allocate their funding, mandating that districts provide proportional funding to private and parochial schools based on attendance, trampling over the separation of church and state and siphoning funds away from traditional public schools that serve more impoverished students. After facing criticism and defiance from some superintendents, last Friday DeVos stated that she will codify the guidance into state policy.

In a recent interview on SiriusXM radio with Cardinal Timothy Dolan, the Catholic archbishop of New York, DeVos made clear her intentions. Dolan suggested that DeVos was trying to “utilize this particular crisis to ensure that justice is finally done to our kids and the parents who choose to send them to faith-based schools.” DeVos replied, “Yes, absolutely. For more than three decades that has been something that I’ve been passionate about.”

Other aspects of the CARES Act earmarked for children’s social services are proving to be empty promises. Fully two months after the passage of the act, an emergency program supposedly meant to provide food to roughly 30 million impoverished children has so far only served 4.4 million, or 15 percent. The program, called Pandemic-EBT, was meant to transfer funding from school food programs onto electronic cards that families could use at grocery stores, but the federal government has utterly failed to coordinate its implementation, and most states have moved at a laggard pace.

Due to the failure to provide aid, 40 percent of mothers with children under the age of 13 are now experiencing food insecurity, while millions of Americans line up for miles at food banks each week.

Following the closure of schools, most districts implemented grab-and-go programs where families could pick up meals. There is no national data on how many students have used these services, but a weekly tracker in Philadelphia found that merely 11 to 36 percent of students in that city have been served each week.

While the CARES Act was passed in two days in order to prop up the stock market, the so-called HEROES Act is an act of political theater that the Democrats know will not pass through the Senate or be approved by Trump. As teacher unions and other pro-Democratic outfits hailed its passage, the act earmarks only \$60 billion for K-12 education, far below what all experts anticipate will be needed. Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Kentucky) has declared the bill “dead on arrival,” while House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy (R-Calif.) stated, “This is a political messaging bill that has no chance of becoming law.”

The looming cuts to education come at a time when schools need more funding than ever to ensure the safety and well-being of all students and educators amid the pandemic. School districts across the US are planning to reopen schools in the fall, following the demands of the Trump administration and Wall Street, which recognize the necessity of reopening schools to ensure that workers can return to their workplaces.

The *WSWS Teacher Newsletter* urges all teachers and educators to form independent rank-and-file committees in every school and neighborhood to organize a struggle against the planned cuts to public education, and to ensure the safety of all educators and students as districts demand the reopening of schools. The lessons

of the wave of teachers strikes since 2018 must be assimilated, above all, the need for educators to maintain political independence from the pro-corporate Democratic Party and its enforcers in the teacher unions.

The central issue that animated the explosive series of teachers strikes—beginning with the powerful 2018 wildcat strike by West Virginia teachers—was the legacy of austerity imposed by the Obama administration and state governments run by both Republicans and Democrats following the 2008 financial collapse. While bailing out Wall Street, Obama oversaw the greatest transfer of wealth from the working class to the capitalists in US history, until the present crisis.

In a 2017 report, the CBPP noted that most states significantly cut education spending after 2008, and that by 2015 fully 29 states had yet to restore funding to pre-recession levels, including 12 states that cut per pupil spending by seven percent or more. During that same time period, the number of public K-12 teachers and other school workers fell by 135,000, while the number of students rose by 1,419,000, producing the overcrowded classrooms and dilapidated schools that are now ubiquitous across the country.

Every teachers strike that erupted in response to this defunding of public education—from West Virginia to Arizona, Oklahoma, Washington, Denver, Los Angeles, Oakland, Chicago, and more—was deliberately isolated and sabotaged by the teacher unions. The American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and National Education Association (NEA) isolated each struggle and peddled the lie that electing Democrats in 2018 and 2020 would improve conditions in the schools, as if the experience of the Obama administration never happened.

Huge sections of the over 700,000 teachers who went on strike over the past two years rightfully felt betrayed by the unions. Those who entered into struggle with a genuine desire to fully fund public education must now take the critical step of forming new, independent organizations of struggle. These rank-and-file committees, composed of all educators, including full-time teachers, custodians, substitutes, paraprofessionals, cafeteria workers, and all staff members, must fight to unite with parents, students and the broader working class to defend the social right to high-quality public education.

The provision of adequate funding requires a frontal assault on the private fortunes of the corporate and financial oligarchy and a radical redistribution of wealth. The pandemic has utterly exposed the bankruptcy of the existing capitalist system, and the necessity for a new form of social and economic organization, a socialist society based on upholding the interests of the working class. All educators interested in fighting for this perspective should sign up for our newsletter, follow us on Facebook, and contact us today at teachers@wsws.org.



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